

MASSNET COMES TO HIS OWN

NEW YORK AT LAST TAKES TO THE FRENCH COMPOSER.

Quarter of a Century's Indifference to His Operas—Mary Garden's Part in Securing His Final Triumph—Noted Singers as His Heroines—His Works.

More than a quarter of a century followed the first planting of a Massenet sapling in the operatic soil of this country before the Massenet genius took root. "Manon," which in the opinion of many is the masterpiece of this composer, was heard back in the late Academy of Music days when the immortal Mapleson was struggling against the inevitable tendency of all things in New York to progress northward. In one of his last seasons in the theatre on Irving place he brought forward Massenet's "Manon," to please, it was said, Missie Hauk, who wanted to sing the leading role.

Italian opera furnished in those days most of the repertoire, and modern French opera of the kind of "Manon" was uncommon. Miss Hauk gratified her ambition when the opera was sung on December 23, 1885. Associated with her in that performance were Messrs. del Puente and Giannini.

The atmosphere of the Academy of Music in those days was not favorable to lasting success of any kind. The occasional appearances of Adelina Patti were brilliant episodes of its last days as an opera house. Its end was in view and Massenet probably was not sensational enough in any particular to arouse the interest of the public, and certainly Mme. Hauk had passed the point at which her personal success in the rôle of the youthful heroine could be sufficiently marked to turn the tide in the opposite direc-

Italian who had the greatest sympathy with French music—his favorite task after conducting "Die Meistersinger" was his accomplishment of the same duty for Gounod's "Roméo et Juliette"—had charge of the work, which did not reach the stage until the supplementary season of the company, and of course any new work sung as late as April 29 had no chance of making an impression on a public then very indifferent to new works.

So "Werther" was sung only once then and once during the following year. Its production did not stir the placid waters of operatic taste, which found satisfaction only in the works of Gounod, and chiefly "Faust" at that, and the newly introduced works of Wagner. "Werther" at the Metropolitan Opera House then has significance only as showing the slight progress made here by a composer who had been making his way in every other country.

Massenet's operas have dealt largely with the fair and frail, and their delicately perfumed scores are nearly always employed in delineating the story of some boudoir Magdalen. Such is the tenor of "Manon," "Thais," "Sapho" and some of the operas not yet heard here.

When Maurice Grau finally engaged Sybil Sanderson to come to this country in 1895 it was natural that she should select "Manon" in which her great Parisian vogue had been won, as the vehicle by which she was to show her talents to her country people. Some of her friends, among them Emma Eames, always thought that she appeared to better advantage in other rôles, because her art as a singer had made progress since the time that she first sang "Manon" in a small town of Holland before appearing at the Opéra Comique. It was natural, though, that both her own desires and managerial advice should prompt her to select the part in which she had been trained by the composer who had after-



GERALDINE FARRAR AS MANON.

tion from which the Metropolitan was backtracking them.

At all events "Manon" soon disappeared from the programmes and incidentally Jules Massenet started on a slumber destined to continue for almost a ten years. It can scarcely be said that even then he was not haughty. He hardly woke.

Maurice Grau had always a predilection for French opera, partly because he had spent much of his leisure time in France, and partly because his personal surroundings were entirely French. Then his eyes had for a long time been fixed on the distinction conferred by the Legion of Honor. So in 1891 in searching about for a new work to add to his repertoire, if not to the repertoire of the company at the Metropolitan Opera House, his choice fell on Massenet's "Werther." Jean de Reszke was anxious to sing the title rôle, and in those days his wishes were usually imperative. Eames and Sigrid Aronson sang the two feminine rôles, while Messrs. Maréchal and Carbone had the other rôles. Luigi Mancinelli, an

ward written operas especially for her, such as "Esclarmonde," "Le Mage," in which she first passed over to the Opéra in Paris from the smaller frame of the Opéra Comique, and "Thais," all designed to display her qualities at their best.

Then Mr. Grau had surrounded the beautiful debutante with a cast chosen from the giants that were in the Metropolitan company at that time. They almost lifted Massenet's refined work into the region of a much more grandiose style. Jean de Reszke, singing *Des Grieux* for the first time; Victor Maurel and Pol Plançon were some of the members of that notable cast, which is so far beyond anything the directors of the Metropolitan could arrange nowadays that its quality would probably escape them altogether.

Anybody who criticises any feature of a French or Italian performance nowadays is informed that any emotion but whole souled approval is a sign of intellectual weakness and artistic ignorance that should be discouraged. There were singers in those days, however. M. Maugère supplanted M. de Reszke



LINA CAVALIERI AS THAIS.

as the chevalier in some of the four performances that the opera enjoyed before Miss Sanderson, more in sorrow than anger, returned to France after a visit here that had been much more interesting to her in the incidents it provided in private life than in her experience on the stage of the Metropolitan.

When she returned with Maurice Grau during the season of 1901 she did not appear in "Manon" in New York but sang it on the road. Her stay with the company lasted for only the first weeks of the season and then she sang in "Roméo et Juliette." So even his chosen interpreter did not accomplish much toward arousing among her countrymen love for the music of Massenet.

During the following year Mme. Melba added the Massenet heroine to her repertoire, but without sufficient success to secure more than a few performances for the opera. Some of her successors in this part were Frances Saville, a charmingly dainty and delicate heroine of the Provost romance, who sang with Ernest Van Dyck and was never able to do more than get a hearing on a Saturday night in spite of the exquisite interpretation she gave of the part; Gerda Farrar and Frances Alda, who is a niece of Mme. Saville. Mme. Alda sang the part in Paris, while Gerda Farrar first gave it in Berlin to the *Des Grieux* of Franz Nosal.

Emma Eames contemplated *Manon* for a while but found herself too unsympathetic with the psychology of the rôle to continue her study of it. Mme. Sembrich had often sung the rôle in St. Petersburg, but she never undertook it here, where the opera was popular enough to make the work of preparing it worth while.

When Mme. Calvé was at the height of her popularity here as *Carmen* she was engaged to marry Henri Cain, the French man of letters, and he took to M. Massenet in Paris a libretto which he thought would make an admirable one act opera for the use of his fiancée of those days. The work dealt with an episode on the frontier in a war between France and Spain, when to secure the release of her lover *Anita*, a peasant girl, visited the General of the opposing forces and returned to her lover for whom she had run such a risk only to be repudiated by him for infidelity.

Mme. Calvé received this work one day during her stay in New York and had the opera played over on the piano for some of her friends. It was then decided that she should sing it here the following season in French; but she did not come back the following year, owing to a dispute with Mme. Eames and various other members of the company. So "La Navarraise," the opera designed for Mme. Calvé, did not materialize until December 11, 1895.

It did not make a great impression on the general public, although Mme. Calvé had an interesting rôle from a dramatic point of view. Nor did it make any more popular success when Mme. Calvé and later Mme. Gerville-Réache added the opera to the repertoire of Massenet at the Manhattan Opera House, where that composer first became an important figure in the musical life of this city.

There was destined, however, to be one more effort to suit Massenet to the vast frame of the Metropolitan, and this attempt was made with an opera that

seemed to promise success. There is nothing of the opera comique form about "Le Cid." Corneille's grandiose tragedy has been treated by Massenet with all the pomp and circumstance of which his muse is capable.

Mr. Grau brought forward the work for the first time in New York on February 12, 1897. It was of course chiefly for the purpose of providing Jean de Reszke with a new rôle and showing him as well as two other members of the company in rôles which they had created at the Opéra in Paris when Massenet's work was sung there first. These were Edouard de Reszke as *Don Diego* and Pol Plançon as *Le Comte de Gormas*. Then Jean Lassalle was in his last season here, while Felis Litvinne, who had come over to this country to supplant Mme. Nordica in the company, was a famous *Chimène*. Clementine de Vore, who is still a popular singer of English opera in London, chanted the few phrases of the *Infanta*.

"Le Cid" had only two representations that year in spite of the collection of giants in the cast. It was revived later to show the New York public just how the statue of Gormas was known by the very French name of Lucienne Breval had sung this part at the fountain head of all its tradition, the Paris Opéra. The strenuous and untiring Albert Alvarez poured his way through "Le Cid" in company with her and the two sang at very short notice the fifth act of the opera when Mr. Grau organized a performance in honor of Prince Henry of Prussia.

Mme. Sembrich was to sing the first act of "La Traviata," but heard that royalty had left the opera house and with half the audience, so she declined to appear. Fortunately both Mme. Breval and M. Alvarez were already in costume. They jumped into the breach and enabled

the performance to end with as much dignity as such a musical potpourri could possess.

Mme. Melba sang the meagre but tuneful phrases of the *Infanta* with Mme. Breval, Pol Plançon and the two de Reszkes and then the rôle went over to Suzanne Adams, since Mr. Grau did not think that even the popularity of Mme. Melba would add to the vogue of Massenet's heroic opera, and the waste of the salary paid to the Australian prima donna did not appeal to his business sense.

"Le Cid" disappeared after that year never to return to the New York music lovers again. The taste for Massenet has gone in the direction of his newer works. One incident of its career at the Metropolitan Opera House was the celebration of Maurice Grau's twenty-fifth anniversary as a manager, which was held on the stage after a performance of this work. His friends and the artists presented him, along with a speech by Edward Lauterbach, with a cabinet of small silver.

The Massenet history in New York really begins with the advent of Oscar Hammerstein. He announced "Manon" during his first season at the Manhattan Opera House. Mme. Donalds, the youthful Canadian soprano, was to sing the title rôle. But the success of Mme. Bressler-Gianolin "Carmen" concentrated the interest of the director in French opera on that work and a few productions of "Faust," as well as the revival twice of "La Navarraise" for Mme. Calvé.

During his second season Miss Garden came to join his forces, and with her arrival the reign of Massenet began. In addition to "Thais" Mr. Hammerstein gave "Le Jongleur de Notre Dame,"

have been other tenors such as M. Valles and M. Casauran in the rôle of the young lover, but there is little of significance to anything in "Thais" outside the rôle of the frail courtesan and her monk lover.

It is hard to believe that any woman who was not beautiful should attempt the title rôle. Beauty in their interpreters is almost always indispensable to the heroines of the Massenet operas. It is conceivable that Violetta Valéry should not be beautiful but should be interesting, great vocally and a wonderful embodiment of the woman that Verdi illustrated musically from the Dumas play; but such a *Thais* would be impossible.

All the operas patterned to display in the first case the beautiful person of Sybil Sanderson demand physical beauty that can stand the scrutiny of the most piercing eye light through its diaphanous draperies. It would not be possible to make *Thais* only an interesting personality. She must also be an interesting person in the physical sense of the word. So there has never been a clamor from any but the most beautiful ladies of the operatic world to play, sing and look this part.

On the other hand it is quite impossible to think of "Thais" without the haunting beauty of M. Renaud's performance of the part of *Abdel*. Mary Garden has sung the rôle since she went back to Paris, but her first success in this opera was made here. Mme. Cavallieri has the privilege of alternating with her in this opera at the Opéra in Paris, however cruelly she may be kept out of it in this country.

Having been reclaimed by a monk in one Massenet opera, Miss Garden was destined to come forward the second time in the company of Massenet and Anatole



LINA CAVALIERI IN "HERODIADE."

"Herodiade" and "Sapho," and is now preparing the same composer's "Griseidis." There are still depths in the Massenet repertoire that the managerial enterprise has not yet penetrated. As all the rights of the still protected operas belong to Mr. Hammerstein it is probable that all the scores of that composer hereafter heard in New York will be at the Manhattan.

Mary Garden made her first appearance at the Manhattan Opera House on November 25, 1907, in the part which to this day remains the most popular in her repertoire. She sang the title rôle in "Thais." The part of the saint in the desert was taken and has been retained ever since by Maurice Renaud, who has all through her efforts in behalf of the Massenet operas stood at the right hand of the American soprano.

Miss Garden's successful efforts to keep the part of the Egyptian courtesan in vogue by Anatole France altogether her own have been sufficiently exploited. Her wisdom is shown by the size of the audience which invariably greets a production of the opera. Lina Cavalieri has met with great success in this part both in Paris and St. Petersburg, and she also sang it with Mario Battistini in Rome and other Italian cities. "Hands off!" Miss Garden cried when Mlle. Cavallieri modestly asked to have one chance here at the rôle she had been so successful in abroad.

Last summer when there were educational proceedings at the Manhattan Opera House "Thais" even got on the house programme with the title rôle assigned to the dark and pulchritudinous Marguerita Sylva, who promised to make a great success in the part. By wireless or some other mysterious operatic means the news reached Paris and within twenty-four hours the press agent of the Manhattan Opera House was busy informing the newspapers that "Louise" would be given instead. Miss Garden proudly admits her intention to keep all the prima donnas of this particular field.

The opera had seven performances during the first season it was sung here and might have been given more frequently had not M. Renaud been compelled to return to Europe to resume his Monte Carlo engagements. There has never been a more popular performance than this work, which retains its attraction for the public even with the various changes in cast.

The three singers who were responsible for its first favor appeared together the other night—they were, in addition to Miss Garden, M. Renaud and M. Dalmoree—and the union of the three singers gave the opera a freshness which reminded the hearers of its first production here. Jeanne Gerville-Réache, who was then in her first season at the Manhattan Opera House, sang a very small part which she has not taken since that time, while on the contrary Emma Trentini has always added her piquant personality to the twinkling little part of *Griseidis*. There



EMMA TRENTINI IN "THAIS."

Garden's dramatic skill and her great vogue could be employed to make her an interesting heroine of the play.

Thus the part of the little juggler went to her and another Massenet opera long spoken of pettingly as impossible here achieved a triumph and gave the Manhattan Opera House another winning card. Some of the original singers that Jules Massenet had selected for the production at Monte Carlo were in Mr. Hammerstein's company, and they were naturally to be seen in their best. M. Renaud, who sang the cook in the New York production, was the original prior, M. Fougère of the Opéra Comique having the part of the cook, which has now come to M. Gilbert, who is the second to have that rôle. Miss Garden's complete disguise as the little juggler has shown her versatility to a degree that had not been suspected before.

Long before she had ever sung *Thais* or Jean Miss Garden had made her Paris success, and incidentally her London failure as *Manon*, a rôle which she has never yet sung here. It was to be given during her first season at the Manhattan, and with that in mind she hurried to a photographer's just after her arrival and had herself posed before the camera as the Abbé Provost's unlucky lovebird. But there had not yet been an opportunity for her to place this portrait in her Massenet gallery as yet.

When it came to singing *Marguerite* Miss Garden said that she had no sympathy with the rôle, as it was entirely too old-fashioned for her to take any interest in its music or its psychology. That such an opinion might have been expected from a singer who had just traversed a new York audience for the first time the operatic form of Daudet's "Sapho" goes without saying. No work of Massenet gave the critics the same excuse for saying about him what they thought of his earlier operas. It possesses every one of their weaknesses and provides but the faintest musical accompaniment to the Daudet story.

The year that she should have come back here to sing in "La Navarraise" Mme. Calvé went abroad to create at the Opéra Comique the heroine of "Sapho." It was not much of a success then and did not appear on the repertoire of the theatre in which it was given. For all practical operatic purposes, it was just about as dead as the other and earlier "Sapho," whose stances sometime fall on the ears of concert audiences when a French dramatic soprano has wearied of "Pique, me yeux," or "Plus grand dans son obscurité."

Last season Jules Massenet wrote a new scene for the opera and Marguerite Carré, wife of the director of the Opéra Comique, decided that she would like to sing the rôle. As Mme. Carré always does just what she wants to do at the Opéra Comique she sang *Fanny Lorrain*, and the opera enjoyed a more or less anemic revival. It was inevitable that such a part should appeal to Miss Garden, and she came forward as the heart worn *Fanny* as the third of her Massenet rôles here.

So far this opera has made less impression than any of the Massenet works which Mr. Hammerstein has brought forward. It is still new, however, and there are episodes that show Miss Garden at her very best, notably the ballroom scene.

"Griseidis" is to end for the time being the Massenet cycle. It will be different enough dramatically to introduce in a new light the singer who has done more than anybody else to make Massenet a mode in the opera houses of the New World.



MARY GARDEN AS THAIS.



LUCIENNE BREVAL AS CHIMÈNE.



MARY GARDEN IN "LE JONGLEUR DE NOTRE DAME."